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NEWS — 2025 ELECTIONS

Debate fast and lively between Winchester School Committee candidates

CHRIS STEVENS | CORRESPONDENT

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The League of Women Voters of Winchester held its School Committee candidates night on March 6 with incumbents Chris Nixon, left, and Karen Maruyama Bolognese and first-time candidate Stefanie Mnayarji. WINCHESTER NEWS STAFF PHOTO/CHRIS STEVENS

Fiscal trade-offs, literacy, Special Education and "optimizing the
roles among the Select Board, School Committee and Finance Committee

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in developing the annual school budget" were all on the table during the School Committee candidate's debate March 6 at the Jenks Center.

The event was sponsored by the League of Women Voters.

While incumbents Chris Nixon and Karen Maruyama Bolognese and political newcomer Stefanie Mnayarji kept the discussion lively and quick throughout the hour long debate, it was a question about supporting a phone-free schools policy that generated the most rebuttals.

Moderator Margaret Coppe asked if candidates would support a phone-free schools bell-to-bell policy with a goal of minimizing conflicts and enhancing concentration.

Maruyama Bolognese said the rule of thumb across the district is that phones have to stay in backpacks and smartwatches must be set to school mode. But she also said it would be difficult for teachers to police it every single day.

Nixon said he struggled with the question on several levels. He said he'd like to see a different policy at the middle school to help eliminate distractions from electronic devices, but he worries that high schoolers have a greater need for them.

Nixon said he believes teachers at the high school incorporate cell phones into the classroom and he argued seniors will soon be heading to college where cell phones in the classroom are likely a necessity.

Mnayarji, however, said, making schools phone free is one of the greatest gifts they could give students.

"Yes, I support a phone free experience for our children, and I w
expand that language to call it device free, because soon we're go

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have screens glued to our eyelashes and distracting us from reality," she said.

Incumbent Karen Maruyama Bolognese at the League of Women Voters School Committee cand
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Mnayarji argued there is plenty of data to support the idea and phone free districts are reporting students have shown better focus and improved mental health.

Maruyama Bolognese argued it would be difficult to ban all electronic devices because kids need certain real world skills. She also believes they can solve the problem by partnering with families.

Nixon also put families in the spotlight. Another element in the mix is parents and how devices are used at home, he said.

“How many of us have kids who are up at 1 or 2 o’clock in the morning? Parents can be so helpful in getting the devices out of the bedroom so kids actually get eight hours of sleep at night.”

Maruyama Bolognese came back stating she agreed they could be a source of distraction and there should be controls at home, but she thinks education about wise usage is what’s really important.

According to Mnayarji, parents are desperate for answers on how to address technology.

“It’s not a school problem, it’s not a household problem,” she said. “The entire community has to band together to rise above these algorithms. It’s Silicon Valley versus families right now, these are addictive products and we all have to work together as a community.”

On the budget

When it came to debating fiscal trade offs in order to offset a projected school deficit, Nixon balked a little. He said he wouldn’t necessarily call it a budget deficit. He’d call it doing their jobs.

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The School Committee already voted a level services budget that included a 4% increase, but as Nixon and Maruyama Bolognese both said, that is not the budget that will go to Town Meeting. A final budget that could include new literacy or other investments will be voted on March 20, Nixon said.

In terms of how to pay for it, Nixon said the town is sitting on a pile of free cash that could be used to get the schools over the fiscal year 2026 or fiscal year 2027 financial hump, but he acknowledged it is not a sustainable plan. He would look to partner with state and local officials to find sustainable revenue models that should include an override, but an override "doesn't need to be the only solution," he said.

Mnayarji agreed they needed to work together to find a way to make school finances work, but she also said the district needs to think more broadly. While parents and the parent associations are helping to fill in financial cracks, that also is not sustainable.

Maruyama Bolognese agreed an override could be in their future, but also noted they would need at least a year to plan it and communicate that need effectively to the community.

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First-time School Committee candidate Stefanie Mnayarji speaks at the League of Women Voters School Committee candidates night, held on March 6 at the Jenks Center.WINCHESTER NEWS STAFF PHOTO/CHRIS STEVENS

Literacy woes

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While it might take a year of planning to pull off a future override, Mnayarji said — in response to Coppe's question about the current state of the district's literacy program — the need is now.

She reflected on watching a candidates debate in 2022 where a similar question was asked.

"The kindergartners in 2022 are now third graders, and there's still talk about literacy reform," she said. "We cannot let the finances hold back from updating this curriculum."

But Maruyama Bolognese said she supported the process the district has been following over the last 14 months, which is designed to better understand the experience of students, staff and families. She said she supported funding a literacy study, calling the results "difficult to hear," and she supports putting the teachers at the center of the process to find a new curriculum.

"Teachers, I think, have come to understand this process takes time, and we're committed to getting this right and making the right investment for students," she said.

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Nixon agreed with Mnayarji that they knew three years ago there was a problem with the literacy program, but he also agreed with Maruyama Bolognese that they needed to let the current process run its course and hear recommendations from the superintendent.

Because, he reminded voters, "school committees don't choose specific curricula."

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Special Education thoughts

All three candidates agreed there needed to be a greater investment in Special Education services.

Nixon's idea was to look at expanding the district's specialized learning centers. When students were struggling with elementary reading and comprehension, a specific learning center was created at the Vinson-Owen School to address it. It brought kids that had previously been going out of district for help back home, Nixon said.

"We built it and they came," he said. "It was very successful."

Maruyama Bolognese said she also would like to see an investment in resources aimed at early intervention and supporting students in the classroom because feedback from both staff and families demands it.

"It's important that we enable every student to be able to follow their passions and support their needs," she said.

Mnayarji said increased diagnosis of ADHD and Autism Spectrum Disorder are creating a higher demand for services and often there are tier two children who have needs that are not being met.

But things on the federal level could throw a wrench in the expansion wish-list. Nixon noted the task of the newly sworn-in secretary of education is to dismantle the department "to the point where she no longer has a job.

"This really concerns me," he added. "We should recognize that federal funds support Special Education."

Maruyama Bolognese also noted out-of-district tuition costs, wh
gone up almost 18% in the last two years, are also a constant budge

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challenge

Coming together

When asked how the district could best come to a meeting of the minds with the Select Board and the Finance Committee over developing the school budget, Mnayarji had three words.

“Communication, communication, communication,” she said.

Mnayarji said when she breaks down what an ideal investment in say literacy looks like and what it would mean, people come on board.

“Communication is key, documentation is key, and having a trusted partnership between Select Board, Finance and School Committee is the only way to make this functional,” she said. “We need to have shared values and goals.”

Nixon didn’t disagree with Mnayarji, but said he would respectfully add the town manager to the mix. The Select Board will render an opinion, but he said it’s really the School Committee, Finance Committee and town manager that build the budget.

Like Nixon, Maruyama Bolognese agreed communication is key, but said she also thinks it’s important to have a five-year strategic plan and an understanding of multi-year budgeting and investments, because ultimately that is what needs to be communicated.

She said it’s also important to communicate with Town Meeting members, “because at the end of the day, it is Town Meeting that approves our budget. So I would advocate for communicating at every level that we possibly can.”

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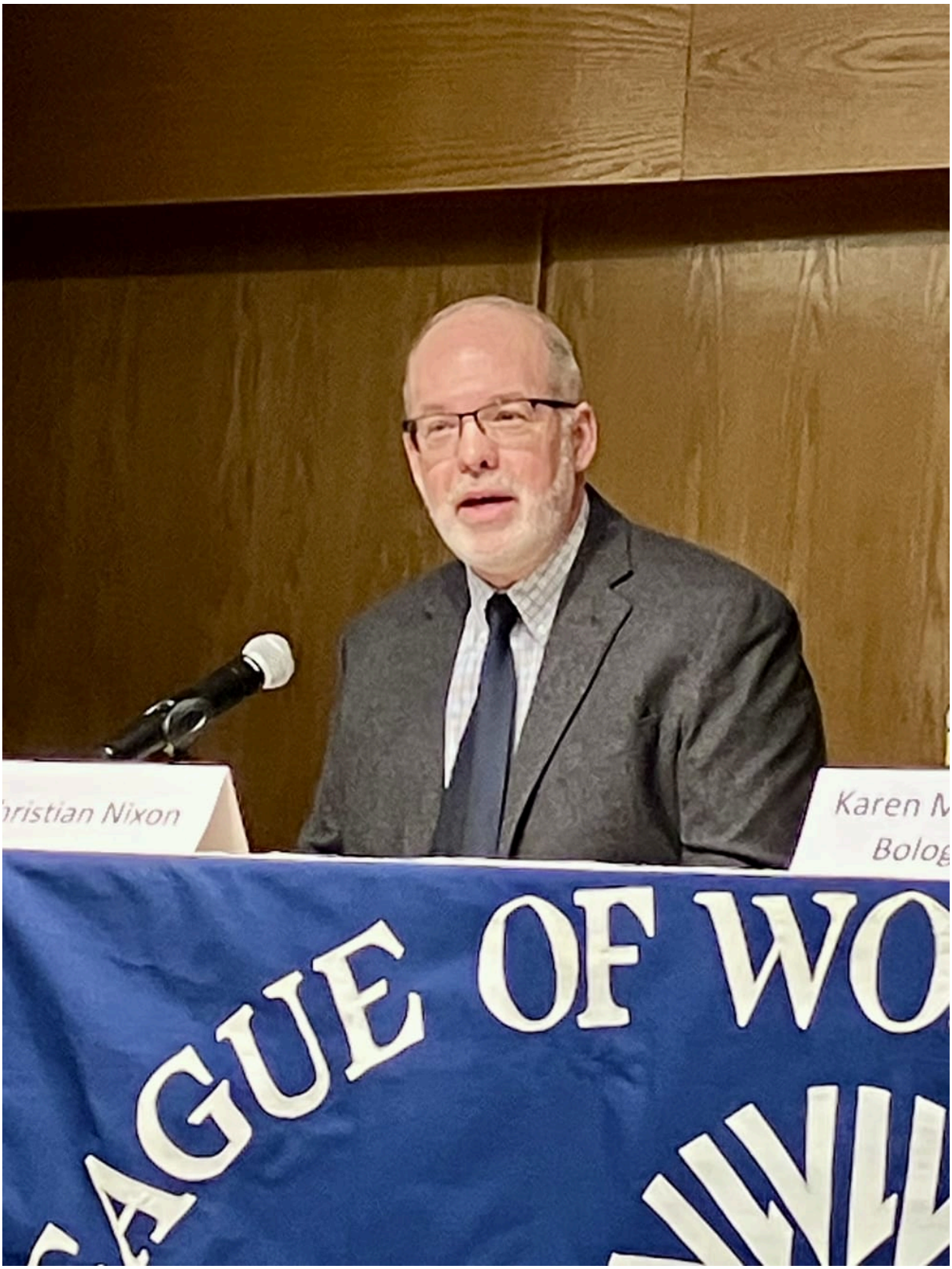

Incumbent Chris Nixon speaks at the League of Women Voters School Committee candidates night on March 6. WINCHESTER NEWS STAFF PHOTO/CHRIS STEVENS

Why vote for...

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Nixon said it's his experience on the School Committee and other town boards and committees that gives him a unique appreciation for how the town works and doesn't work.

"I have a hunger for achieving big goals as a district with a corresponding understanding for how the railroad should run," he said.

He also said his understanding of the workings of other public bodies translates to a better chance for collaboration and success on shared initiatives, investments and change.

Maruyama Bolognese said she listens to the community and works with local and state leaders with a goal of building trust and an aim to talk about Winchester's educational needs.

"I'll continue to expand these conversations as we, as a town, plan for a possible override," she said.

She also said she'll bring her experience in helping to shepherd the new Lynch School project and the connections she's made to the planning for a new Muraco School.

"I've advocated for Winchester 2030, our five-year strategic plan for investing in staffing and improvements in literacy, math, Mandarin and theater," she added. "We'll keep Winchester a strong education leader in the state."

Although she is already a Town Meeting member and an economist by trade with experience consulting for large institutions, Mnayarji said "there is no greater honor than being called a PTO mom."

She said she brings the elementary school voice to the table, but keyed in on issues that face the entire district such as literacy reform, the

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budget, a new Muraco and transparency.

“If there’s one thing you’ll remember about me this evening, I hope it’s that I’m proactive, analytical and a collaborative community leader with a track record that shows I get things done,” she said.

Mnayarji said she also shares another perspective. Having grown up in a home where Arabic was the main language spoken, she attended a Title 1 school and took English as a Second Language classes.

“It’s that experience that drives my commitment to every student, regardless of background or ability, to give them the tools to succeed.”

Voting

Early in-person voting begins Saturday, March 15 at Town Hall, 71 Mt. Vernon St., first floor in the Winchester Room and runs from 9 a.m.-3 p.m.

It will also take place Monday, March 17-March 20, from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m. and Friday, March 21, from 8 a.m.-12 p.m.

The annual town election is Saturday, March 22, with polls open 7 a.m.-8 p.m. in the Winchester High School Cafeteria.

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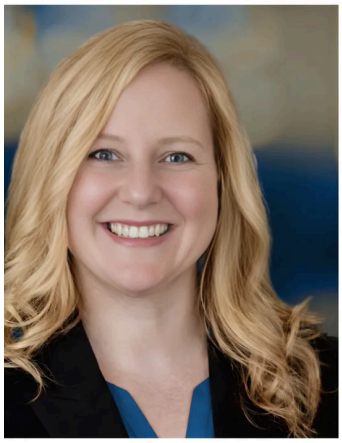

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Winchester School Committee candidates bring contrasting backgrounds to Thursday forum

Two candidates for Winchester's School Committee will face voters at a forum as the district navigates a new literacy curriculum, budget pressures and questions about student mental health. Heather von Mering and John Bellaire are competing for an open seat on the School Committee, which oversees a budget von

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Rep. Michael Day helps House colleagues pass sweeping energy affordability bill

The following was submitted by the Office of Rep. Michael S. Day: Rep. Michael S. Day and his colleagues in the House of Representatives recently passed energy affordability legislation that would result in over $9 billion in savings for utility ratepayers over the next 10 years. The bill maintains critical

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Winchester gun owners face new training rules starting April 2

Public safety data How Winchester compares on firearms licenses in comparable Massachusetts communities Active licenses

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Sen. Jason Lewis, Mass. Senate strengthen fair housing protections for rente

The following was submitted by the Office of Sen. Jason Lewis: State Sen. Jason Lewis

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as of Jan. 25, 2025 — Source: Massachusetts Criminal History Systems Board License to carry firearms Firearms identification card Winchester and Marblehead are the focus communities. Peers selected based on comparable population size, demographics and suburban

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joined his colleagues in the Massachusetts Senate to pass legislation that protects residents from discrimination in the housing market as the Trump administration abandons its enforcement of the federal Fair Housing Act. Illegal discrimination continues

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Celebrate Women's History Month with Girls Leading Change

The following was submitted by the Network for Social Justice: To mark Women's History Month and International Women's Day in 2026, the Network for Social Justice is collaborating with club leaders from Winchester High School and members of the Community Health team from La Colaborativa in Chelsea and

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FEATURES

‘Chicago: Teen Edition’ dances onto the Winchester High School stage

By Talia Ho | Correspondent Fame. Fortune. And all that jazz. This spring, Winchester High School presents “Chicago: Teen Edition,” a bold musical that explores celebrity culture, media manipulation, and the cost of ambition. Set in the 1920s, this iconic production is sure to leave the audience wanting more. Performances will

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Ripley Chapel in Winchester presents ‘Syldason: You Are Welcome Here’

The following was submitted by the Ripley Chapel at First Congregational Church: On Friday, March 13, beginning at 7:30 p.m., live in-person and live streamed from the stunning Ripley Chapel at First Congregational Church, Winchester, 21 Church St., join in with Syldason, a duo concert featuring Sylvie Zakarian,

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